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SUBJECT: VIOLATIONS REPORTED IN MUNICIPAL ELECTION REGISTRATION

REF: BAKU 813

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Major opposition parties Umid ("Hope") and Musavat ("Equality") reported to Embassy officials a number of violations of election procedures in the registration process for the December 23 municipal elections, including pressure on their candidates. These parties have also filed official complaints with the Central Election Commission (CEC), although the CEC investigations have so far found all complaints groundless. The parties have threatened to boycott the election if their complaints are not resolved properly. Embassy officials raised some of these cases with the CEC, and received promises that the CEC would look into them. The Embassy will continue to closely observe the entire electoral process, although interest in these elections among the Azerbaijani population remains low (reftel).

¶2. (SBU) The Musavat party, traditionally the largest opposition party, has filed more than one hundred complaints with the CEC related to the pre-election campaign and the process of registration of nominees. The party claims that it was not given an opportunity to hold their organizational meetings and conduct pre-election activities. For example, a small meeting held in the open area in Barda region in October was interrupted by the local authorities and police. Musavat claims that local executive authorities (ExComs) continue to interfere in activities of election commissions and use different measures to prevent the nominees from opposition parties from running for the municipal election. Musavat says that in Beylagan region ten nominees from Musavat party were forced to withdraw their candidacy though they had initially been registered by Beylagan Constituency Election Commission (ConEC) #81 and approved as candidates for the municipal elections. In addition, Musavat claims that two nominees of Musavat party from Fizuli ConEC#84 were threatened by dismissal from their jobs at public schools by the senior officer of Fizuli District Education Department.

¶3. (SBU) In a November 13 meeting with MP Igbal Aghazade, Chairman of Umid party, he noted that the nominees from their party already registered with the ConECs as a candidate had faced with serious threats and pressures by local executive authorities in all regions of the country. He explained that officials from ExComs or local police visited candidates' houses and threatened them with arrest or other punishment if they did not withdraw their candidacies. For example, though 100 nominees nominated for 27 municipal units in Zardab region had been registered by the ConEC#82, on November 11, 92 of them withdrew their candidacies.

¶4. (SBU) The authorized representatives of Musavat and Umid parties filed complaints with the CEC in relation to these incidents as well as several bureaucratic obstacles created by the Constituency Election Commissions (ConECs). The Chairman of Zagatala ConEC#110 requested additional documents from the candidates nominated by

Musavat, Popular Front and Umid parties, apart from those required by the Election Code.

15. (SBU) PolOff raised these concerns with the CEC's Head of International Relations Rovzat Gasimov. Gasimov stated that the CEC has established expert groups, consisting of CEC members and staff of the Commission to investigate and to ensure the fair, efficient and timely adjudication of complaints and appeals filed to protect electoral rights. So far, all of the complaints and appeals submitted by Musavat and Umid parties have been considered to be groundless. Gasimov promised to look into the specific cases raised by PolOff. Gasimov also stated that the ConECs had been instructed to be liberal in allowing candidates to register, to the point of ignoring irregularities in the signatures collected for nominations. The following day, Gasimov reported that the 92 candidates in Zardab region had not withdrawn their candidacy, but had refused to be listed as candidates from the Umid Party. Gasimov stated that this was due to lack of payment from Umid, and not due to pressure from ExComs who could have prevented their registration if they wanted to do so.

16. (SBU) According to statistical information published by the CEC on November 24, so far 31,861 candidates have been registered, including 17,688 from ruling New Azerbaijan, 292 from pro-government Ana Vatan ("Motherland"), 306 from Civil Solidarity, 348 from Umid, 38 from Azerbaijan Popular Party, 130 from Musavat parties. By law these should be the final tallies of candidates.

Comment

17. (SBU) As a result of the violations and obstacles, major opposition parties Musavat and Umid announced that they may boycott the municipal elections. Arif Hajili, Deputy Chairman of Musavat party, said that the government of Azerbaijan is trying to avoid any

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pre-election activity, including, debates, public gatherings, and free speeches on public TV. MP Igbal Aghazade said that Umid party would boycott the elections unless the CEC investigates their complaints fairly and ensure free and equal opportunity for all parties. The Embassy will continue to observe pre-election and election processes, although interest in these elections among the general public remains low.